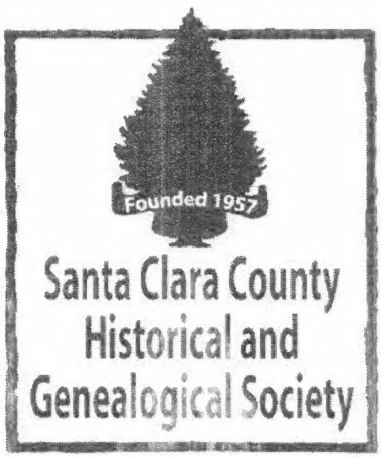
First Governor of California

By Mildred Goddard

Written as part of the Federal Writers' Project, a Works Progress Administration (WPA) Project, 1936

Notes:

- Original in possession of the Santa Clara County Archives, San Jose, California
- Scanned by the Santa Clara Historical and Genealogical Society



√ 64

American Guide
District #9
Mildred Goddard

July 23, 1936

S-254

FIRST GOVERNOR OF CALIFORNIA

Peter Burnett, the first governor of California, was born in Nashville, Tennessee, in 1807. He was the eldest son of George and Dorothy Burnet.

When he was nine years old his parents moved to a farm in Howard County, Missouri. After spending nine years on the farm Peter returned to Tennessee, where for a time he worked as a clerk in a hotel at $100 a year. Later, at double wages, he became clerk in a store.

When nineteen years old he added the second t to the surname to make it"more complete and emphatic" and his brothers followed his example.

In August 1828 he married Harriet W. Rogers. The following spring Burnett bought out his employer, but after three years of unsuccessful storekeeping gave up and went back to the Missouri frontier.

Although Burnett received little schooling he read widely and made some progress in the study of law, and in the spring of 1839, after becoming heavily in debt through the failure of several efforts in business, he turned to law practice for a livelihood. The following winter he was appointed prosecuting attorney for the Liberty district. Two years later, deeply concerned over the continued illness of his wife, and hopeless of earning enough money in Missouri to pay his debts, he decided to move to Oregon. Consulting his creditors and receiving their approval, he set out with his family on the historic migration of 875 men, women, and children that left the vicinity of Independence, Mo., May 22, 1843. June 1 he was elected captain of the expedition, but a week later resigned. Reaching Whitmen's Mission on October 14, he went to Fort Vancouver, taking up a farm near the mouth

FIRST GOVERNOR OF CALIFORNIA (Continued)

of the Willamette, and later another farm near the town of Hillsboro, Oregon.

In September 1848, leading a company of 150 men in wagons and ox teams, they crossed the Oregon plains and started for the California gold fields. They arrived at the Yuba mines November 5. Here the band departed and each went their own way. While digging gold each of the three men remaining with Burnett managed to make approximately twenty dollars a day. After working the mines six weeks he became the attorney and general agent of John A. Sutter, Jr.

Standing on North First street in San Jose at the corner of Fox street is an old two-story frame house which is part of a home originally built by Burnett at Alviso from timber from the Santa Cruz mountains. The trim was shipped around the Horn. In 1851 or '52 the house at Alviso was torn down and the lumber used to construct two homes in San Jose. One was located on Second street and the other on North First street. The First street building has for many years been used by a printing company. During the late 1920's half of this house was torn down to make room for a modern apartment house.

In 1849 he announced himself as candidate for governor. He set out to various towns addressing groups of people. After canvassing several places he returned to San Francisco, where he addressed an immense gathering in Portsmouth Square. A large platform had been erected and during his speech it gave way and fell to the ground. He paused only a moment and continued his talk. He served as governor until the year 1851 when he resigned.

In 1863 he moved to San Francisco and with Sam Brannan and

FIRST GOVERNOR OF CALIFORNIA (Continued)

Joseph W. Winans founded the Pacific Bank, of which he was made president. In 1880 he retired from business, and at this time spent his spare moments writing. Some of his famous works were: "The American Theory of Government considered with reference to the Present Crisis" (1861); "The Path which led a Protestant lawyer to the Catholic Church" (1880); "Recollections of an old Pioneer" (1878); "Reasons why we should believe in God, Love God, and Obey God" (1884).

He died of old age in his San Francisco home on May 16, 1895.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Dictionary of American Biography - Vol. III

The Americana - Vol V

CONSULTANT:

David Burnett